

Ambitions without Direction: a Short Remark on Turkey-China Relations

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Turkey-China relations are contradictory; on the one hand, there is a huge potential for deepening bilateral relations, starting with economic relations and reaching even into the military sphere; on the other hand, Ankara faces geographic and, most importantly, also political constraints such as the question of China's Muslim Turkic Uygur (also Uyghur) minority and Turkey's NATO anchor in the West. Furthermore, neither side seems to be sure how exactly it sees these relations develop.

Until recently, Chinese affairs did not figure prominently as a research field within Turkish academia. For instance, Baskin Oran's standard work on

Turkish Foreign Policy does not mention relations with China at all.¹ It was only after 2010, when a trove of publications – scholarly and journalistic – became publicly available. This is no coincidence, because at that point in time relations would intensify and gain a new quality.²

Developing relations

Official Chinese-Turkish relations started formally in 1927. Two years later, the first Turkish consulate was opened in Nanjing, the capital of Nationalist China. A Treaty of Friendship was signed in 1934 but in general, bilateral relations were on a very low level, both economically and politically.³ Like most other countries, Turkey would not recognize the communist People's Republic of China in 1949 but continued to view Taiwan as the sole representative of China until 1971.

World War II – 1971

After World War II, Turkey gave up its strict neutrality, which was at the core of the classic Kemalist understanding of foreign policy, enshrined in Atatürk's slogan "Peace at home, peace in the world". Because of its ambitions to join NATO, the new government under Adnan Menderes joined the American war effort in Korea (1950-1953), where Turkish troops came into direct contact with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Known to NATO in 1952 and following a staunch anti-communist foreign

¹ Baskın Oran (Ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası. Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne, Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, 3 vols. İstanbul 2004-2013.

² For this short paper we utilised the following sources: Zekeriyya Akdağ, "Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Gelişimi," Hafıza. *Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 1.1 (December 2019), 40-57; Selçuk Çolakoğlu, "Türkiye-Çin İlişkileri: Tek Taraflı Aşk mı?" *Ortadoğu Analiz*, 4.45 (September 2012), 53-66; Cemre Pekcan, "Xi Jinping Dönemi Çin Dış Politikası ve Türkiye ile İlişkileri," in: Merthan Dünder and Gürhan Kirilen (Eds.), *APAM Çin Çalışmaları (I), Tarih, Edebiyat, Ekonomi, Uluslararası İlişkileri*, Ankara 2021, 53-70; see also the very useful draft (taslak) of TASAM's strategic report on Turkish-Chinese relations post-Covid. TASAM (Ed.), *Türkiye-Çin Etki Analizi Karşılaştırmalı Araştırma Projesi ve Çalıştay*, İstanbul 2021, https://tasam.org/tr-TR/Icerik/59730/turkiye_-_cin_kovid-19_sonrasi_yeni_paradigmalar_kusak_ve_yol_ticaret_turizm_yatirim_finans_ve_teknoloji_rapor.

³ Akdağ, "Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Gelişimi," 42.

policy agenda, Turkey joined the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO or Baghdad Pact), an anti-Soviet regional setup among Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom. Chairman Mao criticized CENTO together with SEATO and NATO as “imperialist groupings” and hence regarded their constituent member states as hostile nations. At this point the nadir of Turkey-Chinese relations was reached. Things started to change with the coup d’état of May 1960 in Turkey, when the Chinese press identified the left-leaning coup in Ankara as the beginning of a “real revolutionary and populist period”. A while later, in 1965, party-chairman Zhou Enlai mentioned that there was no reason for Turkey and China not to have bilateral relations – after all, both were Asian nations and shared longstanding historic and cultural relations. From Turkey’s perspective, maintaining the status quo of bilateral relations with China did not really make sense any longer. After all, unlike the Soviet Union, communist China did not pose a direct security threat and Ankara’s frustration over its Western allies’ position on Cyprus was widespread throughout the administration and the populace. Thus, in 1963-64, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara gave the recognition of the People’s Republic of China some thought. These attempts were soon to be scuttled, when in 1965 the conservative *Adalet* Party came to power and followed a staunch anti-communist foreign policy in line with US global strategic designs. Even so, the small thaw in relations did bear fruit as in 1966 an unofficial Chinese trade delegation visited Turkey. Until 1971, bilateral relations between Turkey and the People’s Republic of China largely remained at that level.⁴

1971 – 1990

This changed dramatically in 1971, when the People’s Republic became the sole representative of China within the United Nations. Following US lead, Ankara too recognized Beijing and downgraded its relations with the National Chinese authorities in Taiwan. What had been thought to be a pragmatic and non-partisan foreign policy measure soon turned out to become a toxic issue of domestic politics; because in 1971, the military forced the ruling *Adalet Partisi* out of office, whilst it was still the strongest party in parliament. Embittered, *Adalet*, now in opposition, would block any motion of the weak government appointed by the military. Yet, this was more than

⁴ Ibid., 42-44.

only ordinary filibustering. From this juncture in its history (1971) until the coup of September 12, 1980, Turkey lived through a phase of bitter political turmoil. What started as a left-inspired students' movement in 1968 became a strong leftist insurgency towards the end of the decade, when combating communist underground movements would control whole shantytowns, often fighting over them with fascists or among themselves. The first peak of leftist violence occurred in 1971-73; hence, *Adalet* and other right-wing parties would vociferously oppose any move towards rapprochement with communism for ideological reasons; including bilateral relations with China.

Maoist side-show

This being said, Turkey's security establishment was very well aware of the fact that China, unlike the Soviet Union, which used Syrian intelligence in order to manipulate certain leftist extremist groups and to also utilize them against NATO targets inside Turkey, would stay aloof from domestic Turkish affairs and shunned direct contacts with those "revolutionaries" (i.e. terrorists) who considered themselves to be Maoists. Maoism, like many other radical leftist ideologies, came to Turkey during the 1960s, mostly via writings translated from European languages. It never became the mainstream of Turkey's radical underground, but it preserved a surprisingly high level of violence and longevity. Until this day, Maoist groups have been active as both urban and rural guerrillas in Turkey and in Syria as well as in Greece, Austria, Germany, and to a lesser degree in Switzerland and Belgium; overshadowed only by the much more famous PKK. This is not the place to detail their type of Maoism or their activities; suffice it to say that a distinction between the Maoist groups in the Turkish West of the country and the Kurdish East and Southeast has to be made because the Kurds were much more motivated by anti-Sovietism and some Kurdish Maoists such as the "Kawa" movement would criticize the Chinese for their own imperialism in Africa⁵ – already in 1977! Furthermore, Turkish Maoism split after the fall of the "Gang of Four" and the promotion of China as a guardian of the "Third World". Thus, several small pro-Albanian (hoxhaist, i.e. followers of the Albanian communist leader Enver Hoxha) guerrilla-parties (or armed political sects) emerged; many of them still exist today as both legal and illegal

⁵ Cemil Gündoğan, *Kawa Davası Savunması ve Kürtlerde Siyasi Savunma Geleneği*, İstanbul 2007, 27, 28.

political outlets in Turkey and abroad. In short, when the Turkish government finally recognized the People's Republic as sole representative of China and bilateral relations were formally established in 1971, Ankara wasn't able to exploit these relations beyond the existing low level of trade contacts.

After the coup

Things changed with the military coup d'état in 1980. Again, it was frustration with Western allies – this time their criticism of the country's abysmal human rights record and the European Community's lacklustre embrace of Turkey - which increased the willingness to engage with China. Furthermore, after the Chinese-Vietnamese War in 1979, Beijing's relations with Moscow deteriorated further and China was eager to intensify its diplomatic relations with the Soviet neighbourhood. A final push-factor towards stronger relations was the economy. Both countries struggled to integrate their state-run or state-dominated economies in the global economic and financial system and therefore looked for new markets. Thus, a combination of economic, diplomatic but also political rationales resulted in a new agreement on trade, industry, and technological cooperation. It was not without irony that the first official state visit to communist China was undertaken in 1982 by President Kenan Evren, who as Chief of the General Staff undertook the hitherto bloodiest military coup d'état in Turkish history in 1980, which literally broke the back of the armed leftist opposition. A year later, Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian visited Turkey. In the final press conference, he and his counterpart stressed common Chinese-Turkish security interests vis-à-vis the Soviet Union's imperialist designs. From this point onwards, bilateral relations were intensified on many levels, such as state visits,⁶ city partnerships, and cultural and technical cooperation. Finally, in 1989, Turkish-Chinese relations peaked with the signing of a bilateral consular agreement.

⁶ Akdağ, "Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Gelişimi," 46, is right when he describes the 1980s as the golden age of Turkish-Chinese relations, the list of state visits after Evren and Xiaqian is indeed impressive. 1984: Chinese State Minister Li Xiannian, 1985: Prime Minister Turgut Özal, and President of Parliament, Necmettin Karaduman (2 separate visits), 1986: Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang, 1988: Minister for Culture, Wang Meng, 1988: Tourism and Cultural Minister Tınaz Titiz.

1990 – 2010

With the end of the Soviet Union, Turkish-Chinese relations lost an important factor of their strategic rationale. Furthermore, China faced Western sanctions after it oppressed the 1989 students' protests. This circumstance made intensifying bilateral relations less attractive for Ankara. Both sides would even compete strategically in the former Soviet Union's newly independent Central Asian republics. The half serious, half propaganda slogan of a "Turkish world from the Adriatic to the Chinese Wall" provoked the Chinese much more than Turkey had expected. Propaganda aside, Turkey's enthusiastic policy towards Central Asia was an even greater concern for China. Ankara reverted soon to its old role as a strong ally of the USA and Washington backed Turkey's policies and presence there, presenting it as a role model for the newfound independent Central Asian Turkic republics. Turkey's – and the USA's and the EU's – attempts to fill the post-Soviet security gap in Central Asia became a security concern of China, which feared a spillover effect to its Western provinces. Yet, despite competition in Central Asia and propagandistic irritations, Turkey and China signed an "Agreement on Judicial Arbitration in Legal, Commercial and Criminal Matters" and in 2002 an "Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Transnational Crime". Before that, in 1992 and in May 1995, President Süleyman Demirel visited China, obviously in order to put bilateral relations back on track. China became even more important after the disappointing 1997 Luxembourg Summit, where Turkey did not achieve EU candidate status. Thus, Turkey deliberately looked at Eastern Asia and early the next year, in 1998, Foreign Minister İsmail Cem visited China and both sides agreed on intensifying economic relations.⁷

East-Turkistani irritations

Yet, in the 1990s, Turkey lived through a wave of ultra-nationalism with pan-Turanist characteristics, something every politician with nationalist credentials must take into account. Indeed, the role of the ancient Turks such as the Liao-Kitan Empire in China and the presence of a sizeable Turkish-Muslim minority inside China are recurrent tropes in pan-Turanist discourses, which usually get stronger within the Turkish public when

⁷ Akdağ, "Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Gelişimi," 42.

frustration with the Europeans rises. Hence, when in 1998 deputy Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit visited China, he stated that for Turkey, Europe is not the whole world and Turkey entered a phase of discovering its own Asian roots.⁸ Quite interestingly, this line of argumentation dovetails with Zhu Enlai's arguments in the 1960s! Yet, historic and cultural bonds with China are not an issue of ancient or pre-modern history. The Muslim Turkish Uygur minority would become a recurrent irritant to Chinese-Turkish relations.

In 1992, President Turgut Özal took the unusual step to welcome exiled Uygur leader İsa Yusuf Alptekin (1901-1995), a former Guomindang politician and Chinese diplomat who had lived in Turkey since 1954 and was active in pan-Turkish circles. According to Alptekin, the liberation of East-Turkistan (Xinjiang) should follow the liberation of West-Turkistan (former Central Asian Soviet republic).⁹ Yet, it is hard to believe that Özal had more in mind than paying lip service to the ultra-nationalist and pan-Turanist sentiments in Turkey. As a matter of fact, Turks from China are numerically a smaller group in Turkey than those from the Ex-Soviet Union or the Balkan Muslims; hence, they are negligible at the ballot box.¹⁰ Valuing good relations over the mystical bond with a physically and culturally distinct group of East Asian Turks (and certainly taking into account China's fierce response to Turgut Özal), the Prime Minister of the day, Mesut Yılmaz signed a secret decree according to which public servants should view the Uygur question from the viewpoint of China's territorial integrity and discouraged ministers as well as high-ranking public servants to attend public meetings or any event organized on behalf of Eastern-Turkistan, or to get into contact with East-Turkistani immigrant societies, whose activities in Turkey Chinese authorities found so bothersome.¹¹ Indeed, Turkey constrained the activities of the East-Turkistani societies to such a degree

⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁹ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰ Pekcan, "Xi Jinping Dönemi Çin Dış Politikası ve Türkiye ile İlişkileri," 62; Whilst negligible numerically, the Uyghurs and other – tiny – refugee communities from East-Turkistan were well known and politicised; for more details cf. Ingvar Svanberg, "Turkistani Refugees," in: Peter Alford Andrews, *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, (Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients) 60.1, Wiesbaden 2002, 591-601.

¹¹ Akdağ, "Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Gelişimi," 48.

that they preferred to relocate to Western Europe or to the USA.¹² From this point onwards, the Uyghur reality was dealt with differently, as official visitors from Turkey would include China's far West (i.e. Eastern-Turkistan) in their visits to China. The first to do so was ultra-nationalist and pan-Turanist Devlet Bahçeli in his function as State Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, who visited Urumqi and Kashgar during his official state visit to China in 2002.¹³ The same did Abdullah Gül in 2009, when he visited China (the third Turkish President since 1982 to do so). The symbolic value of the Turkish president to visit Urumqi cannot be underestimated. However, a few months after his visit the security situation in Urumqi deteriorated dramatically. The now infamous "Urumqi incidents" were widely covered by the international media (at least as much as this was possible given the circumstances) and heavily criticized by the international community and the Turkish public and political cast alike. It was however reserved to the prime minister of the day, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to name these events in his unique hyperbolic style an "almost genocide".¹⁴ Even so, Turkish-Chinese irritations did not last for too long and in the following year Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu would visit China again, starting his visit in the Uyghur town of Kashgar, he bemoaned the incidents and the subsequent deterioration of Turkish-Chinese relations and hoped that the Uyghur people could become bridge-builders between the two nations. Even more, and clearly attempting to ease his Chinese hosts, he stressed the possibility of cooperation in Central Asia. Two years later Prime Minister Erdoğan visited China ahead of a strong economic delegation, again stopping in Xinjiang (East-Turkistan) en route to Beijing.¹⁵ Thus, Turkey was adamant not to allow the Uyghur question to disturb bilateral relations. Yet, it has remained a permanent irritant, for instance in 2019, when the Western media widely covered Uyghur unrest and Chinese oppression, especially the "Vocational Education and Training Camps". In Turkey, the case of famous Uyghur folk singer Abdurrahman Heyit found great public interest especially in the social media, and therefore led to an official condemnation on behalf of the MoFa on the – false – grounds that the singer had died in a Chinese prison. Yet, the Chinese were

¹² Pekcan, "Xi Jinping Dönemi Çin Dış Politikası ve Türkiye ile İlişkileri," 61; among other things, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who in 1995 as mayor of İstanbul named a park after Alptekin would tacitly change its name again a year later in 1996.

¹³ Akdağ, "Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Gelişimi," 48.

¹⁴ Ibid., 51.

¹⁵ Ibid., 52.

able to produce a video of a very much alive Mr. Heyit who currently lives “happily” according to his own testimony in a “Vocational Education and Training Camp”. A few months later, in July 2019, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan argued that the different ethnic groups in Xinjiang live together – “happily”.¹⁶ Ever since, he has modified this statement depending on the circumstances. Uygur demonstrations and other anti-Chinese activism were at times accepted but time and again, Uygur activists have faced expulsion to China. Hence, it is not to be expected that the issue of China’s far West (East-Turkistan, Xinjiang) and the fate of the Uygurs would disturb Turkey-China relations seriously.

More business, more problems

It goes without saying that the economy is at the very heart of bilateral Turkish-Chinese relations. In this regard, the 2000 visit of State Minister Jiang Zemin was a breakthrough. Not only did he receive the highest order of the Republic of Turkey, but his visit would also prepare the ground for Prime Minister Zhu Rongji’s visit in 2002 when four important bilateral trade agreements were signed. In January 2003, after a visit to the USA, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited China in his function as Secretary General of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, talking business and infrastructure for the first time to the Chinese. However, whilst the potential of mutual benefits remains great, the risks must not be underestimated.¹⁷

One topic of Erdoğan’s 2003 visit to Beijing was the work on the Kars-Tbilisi railroad, which Ankara wanted the Chinese to help speed up. A similar wish regarding the İstanbul-Ankara high-speed train and infrastructure investments in South-Eastern Anatolia was brought forward during the 2005 state visit of Abdullah Gül.¹⁸ Yet, investments in the Turkish infrastructure did not develop the way Turkey had hoped for. Between 2002 and 2010, China did not conduct high-level visits to Turkey, but instead visited and invested in almost all neighbouring countries. Turkey’s concerns peaked in 2010, when the Chinese leading enterprise COSCO invested in the Athenian port of Piraeus. Ankara assumed that, once operational, it would cater

¹⁶ Ibid., 53.

¹⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁸ Ibid., 49.

exclusively for the burgeoning Chinese – European market and thus sideline traditional economic hubs such as İstanbul and the role of Turkey as a geographic bridge from Asia to Europe.¹⁹ China did not only question future business with Ankara, but also vital sectors such as Turkey’s successful textile industry. A WTO member since 2001, China would put pressure on all developing countries due to its vast overproduction. Turkey therefore warned in 2005 that after the abolishment of the quota-system in textiles, Chinese production would lead to the loss of valuable markets for many developing countries. A fact soon to be proven true and for which China severely criticized Turkey. Another irritant was Cyprus. When Cyprus became a full EU member in 2004 in spite of the fact that the referendum on unification was rejected by the Greek side, Turkey suggested a “Taiwan” model for the island, meaning that countries should maintain economic relations with the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” modelled after the US-Taiwan relationship. It was certainly out of frustration that Ankara undertook such a maladroit diplomatic initiative, which met with fierce Chinese resistance. Expectedly, the Chinese argued that Taiwan was a Chinese province.²⁰ Even so, and almost expectedly, it was once again frustration with the EU when Ankara was disappointed in 2007 with the enlargement process that pushed Turkey closer to China. Another reason was the 2008 financial crisis, which forced Ankara to search for new markets. Like the Europeans, Turkey too found them in China. This came at a juncture in time, when the USA increased their presence in China’s vicinity; hence, China rethought the strategic value of Western countries including Turkey.

Strategic partners? (2010 –)

Not before long, both sides tried to go back to business as usual. Already at the 2009 state visit an agreement was reached regarding Chinese tourism in Turkey, common Turkish-Chinese investments in third countries and – “to the extent it is possible” – cooperation in regional affairs, notably the Middle East.²¹ However, as seen from Ankara’s perspective not much seems to be possible, because China embraces an opposite position on important, if not

¹⁹ Ibid., 50.

²⁰ Ibid., 42.

²¹ Ibid., 51.

vital issues for Turkey such as Kosovo, Bosnia, Cyprus and Karabagh. And when Turkey lived through difficult times in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003, China was quick to cultivate relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil. In 2007, the Chinese opposed Turkish military operations against the PKK in the region.²² The same holds true for the case of Syria where China as a matter of principle would support the government and Turkey took the side of some rebel groups.²³ But also in the UN, where both sides found common ground by insisting on “democratizing the decision-making process” but could not agree on how to do so.²⁴

Even so, a further set of agreements was signed at the 2010 state visit of Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao to Turkey in which both sides agreed on a currency SWAP, hence the use of the Turkish Lira and the Yuan as trade currencies. Furthermore, for the first time China and Turkey declared themselves “strategic partners”. Two years later, China’s new strongman Xi Jinping visited Turkey ahead of an economic delegation that included the CEOs of China’s leading enterprises; both sides signed 28 trade and economic agreements. Erdoğan responded in kind when half a year later he brought a 300+ business delegation to China. Among other agreements, a notable one on the “Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy” was signed. In 2015, Erdoğan visited China for the first time as president and relations deepened even further with the signing of an “Intergovernmental Turkey-China Cooperation Committee” in 2016. Later the same year, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi participated at a meeting in the framework of the “Chinese-Turkish Foreign Ministers’ Consultation Mechanisms”. Further steps were taken in the years 2017-2020, such as the signing of a “Cultural Exchange Program” and an “Action Plan for the Development of Mutual Trade Cooperation and Investment”.²⁵

Yet in spite of all the intensifying economic and political cooperation agreements and the obvious high esteem in which Xi Jinping and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hold each other, pertinent questions remain. To begin with, on the strategic level cooperation is uneasy to say the least. Regarding Central

²² Çolakoglu, “Türkiye-Çin İlişkileri,” 58.

²³ Akdağ, “Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Gelişimi,” 54.

²⁴ Ibid., 53.

²⁵ Ibid., 52.

Asia the involvement of Pakistan, China's old ally, as a catalyst for common projects has been suggested, without much of a result. Even worse, China together with Russia seems to keep Turkey at bay given the fact that almost all Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) plus India and Pakistan (since 2017) are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).²⁶ Turkey was granted observer status at the 2012 SCO summit in Beijing. In 2016, frustrated with the lack of progress regarding Turkey's EU accession process, Erdoğan would float the idea of abandoning the membership process altogether and to apply for full membership at the SCO. Clearly responding to Turkey's frustration with the EU, the SCO granted Turkey the chair of the SCO's energy club for the year 2017 as a first non-member. Panicking American reactions were for fear that Turkey could be lost to China.²⁷ However, no further steps towards full SCO membership have been undertaken. But given the SCO's anti-NATO and anti-EU character, Turkey will not become a full member at all.²⁸ Apparently, Turkey's flirt with the SCO does not give Ankara the necessary leverage towards the Europeans. A short examination of economic and military relations confirms the impression of Turkish-Chinese affairs being rather to Beijing's advantage.

More of the same: Belt and Road

China's Belt and Road Initiative allowed for ever closer economic cooperation. The said initiative is basically a huge investment program in transit infrastructure covering land, sea, and air routes. Ultimately, so it is said, a huge zone of free trade and production from China to Europe should emerge. The size and the interlinked nature of these projects need much high-level political coordination.²⁹ Thus, President Erdoğan participated at

²⁶ The SCO has eight full members: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan (all since 1996), plus Uzbekistan (since 2001) and India and Pakistan (since 2017); four observer states, namely Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia and six dialogue partners, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey. See <http://eng.sectsc.org>.

²⁷ Lina Wang, "Will Turkey Join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization instead of the EU?" *The Diplomat*, November 4, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/will-turkey-join-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-instead-of-the-eu>.

²⁸ Pekcan, "Xi Jinping Dönemi Çin Dış Politikası ve Türkiye ile İlişkileri," 62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

the first “Belt and Road Forum”, and in 2017, Turkey participated at ministerial level. Erdoğan had another possibility to meet with Xi Jinping at the 2019 Osaka G-20 summit, when they debated further security and strategic cooperation and Erdoğan spoke in favour of the Belt and Road Initiative, showing a great interest in G5 and “smart cities” cooperation.³⁰

Turkey initially participated only in one of the six “cooperation corridors” of the Belt and Road Initiative, namely the “Transcaspian” corridor connecting China via Central Asia, the Caucasus, Anatolia and the Balkans to Europe. In a first phase, this corridor connects Turkey by train via Georgia to Azerbaijan and by the Caspian Sea to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. In 2019, business was started using the Baku – Tbilisi – Kars railroad. A first Chinese freight train passed İstanbul via the “Marmaray route”, which connects the Asian and the European part of the town via the famous rail-tunnel under the Bosphorus. For the future planners hope Chinese freight trains will pass via Central Asia, the Caucasus and Turkey through the Balkans, Hungary and Slovakia up to the Czech Republic, right to the heart of Europe. Yet, Ankara is also active in the “middle corridor” connecting China with Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.³¹ It is not clear yet, whether the “middle corridor” is the very geo-strategic angle of Ankara’s 2021 decision to stay in Afghanistan, or whether this decision is solely related to US-Turkish bilateral relations.

A key financial and political instrument for the Belt and Road Initiative is the “Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank” (www.aiib.org). With 30%, China holds the lion’s share of this bank, founded in 2015 with a capital of 100 billion USD and operational since 2016. Turkey was also one of its founding members and, after Indonesia and India, is the third-biggest receiver of the AIIB’s financial investments. From 2016 to 2021, the bank invested 1.4 billion USD in various Turkish projects, such as the Tuz Gölü Natural Gaz Depot Enlargement Project, the Turkish Industrial Development Bank’s Renewable Energy Project, and infrastructural credits.³² Impressive as these numbers are, geography cannot be ignored and the proximity to Europe pays handsomely off in transport costs, something even the best high-speed train

³⁰ Akdağ, “Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Gelişimi,” 53.

³¹ Pekcan, “Xi Jinping Dönemi Çin Dış Politikası ve Türkiye ile İlişkileri,” 65.

³² Ibid., 64.

from China cannot overcome. Furthermore, Turkey still runs a chronic deficit in its trade balance with China. In 2018, Turkish exports numbered roughly 3 billion USD compared to almost 21 billion USD imports from China resulting in a negative balance of almost 18 billion USD. Numbers aren't any better for the following year, although the deficit is slightly smaller but still 15.9 billion in China's favour.³³ A comparison with Germany sheds some light on the one-sided nature of trading with China: imports from both countries were about 18 billion USD in 2019 but exports to Germany numbered 16 billion USD, whereas exports to China were about 2.5 billion USD.³⁴ Turkey exports mostly raw materials to China but imports high quality technology products such as computers, mobile phones and cameras. In addition, China's main investments are in energy, infrastructure, finance, mining, telecommunication and husbandry. Even so, Chinese direct investments are about 1.5% of all foreign direct investments compared to the Netherlands (15.7%), Spain and Germany (both 6.1%), Luxembourg (6.2%) or some other European countries.³⁵ In short, economic relations to China bear fantastic promises for the future, but meagre yields for the present.

Military relations

Military affairs, generally regarded as the key element of any strategic partnership, give an equally ambiguous picture. By the mid-1990s, Turkey started to look to China as a cheap alternative for the West as a provider of military hardware and equipment. First talks about Turkey's wish to buy Chinese arms were tabled on the occasion of an official visit of Chief of the General Staff Hakkı Karadayı in 1997. How much China values relations with the Turkish military can be seen in the fact that Karadayı was received by President Jiang Zemin and Defence Minister Chi Haotian.³⁶ Yet, the first real step towards cooperation in the arms industry took place a year earlier in 1996 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding regarding the acquisition of Chinese WS-1 missiles worth 150 million USD, which also

³³ For statistics on the Turkey-China trade balance see TASAM, *Türkiye-Çin Etki Analizi*, 5 (years 2013-2019) and Pekcan, "Xi Jinping Dönemi Çin Dış Politikası ve Türkiye ile İlişkileri," 63 (years 2007-2018).

³⁴ TASAM, *Türkiye-Çin Etki Analizi*, 9, 10.

³⁵ Ibid., 5, 6.

³⁶ Çolakoğlu, "Türkiye-Çin İlişkileri," 56.

included the prospect of common production in Turkey. Not much has matured out of this intention; thus, in 2001 Chief of the General Staff Hüseyin Kıvrıkoğlu visited China, adamant to overcome shortcomings in their cooperation and to expand existing projects³⁷ – presumably in the arms industry but not much is known about the nature of these “shortcomings”. High-level military contacts continued though; in 2005, General İbrahim Fırtına, head of the Turkish Air Force, visited China. The Turkish side’s demands are proof of Ankara’s greater strategic vision: the general’s wish list included cooperation in mid-range air defence systems, space technology including terrestrial space stations, satellite launch facilities and reconnaissance satellites. These topics – cooperation in air defence and space – were brought up again in the 2006 visit of the head of the Chinese Air Force, General Qiao Qingchen. Two years later, the Chinese Defence Minister Liang Guanglie thanked the Turkish Commander of the Air Force, General Aydoğan Babaoğlu for Turkey’s commitment to China’s territorial integrity³⁸ – meaning Ankara’s silence regarding the Uyghurs – but not much has been published about military cooperation in the context of this visit. Even so, military relations continued. The Chinese Air Force was invited to the annual “Anatolian Eagle” exercise in 2010 as the only partner. This was a remarkable decision given that NATO allies would traditionally join the exercise. Thus, crossing Pakistani and Iranian airspace, Chinese fighter jets trained together with the Turkish Air Force’s F-4s.³⁹ Following this spirit of ever closer cooperation, Turkey issued a tender for its new air defence systems in 2013, which China won. Yet, the decision to buy and then to integrate Chinese long-range missiles into a NATO system soon met with resistance and in 2017 Ankara skipped the contract – but decided for a Russian system two years later. This system too met its less than glorious end in 2020. It is thus unlikely that intensifying cooperation with China should somehow balance the acquisition of the S-400 air defence system, telling Moscow that Turkey has more options than just Russia or the West.⁴⁰ Military cooperation seems to remain somehow limited in spite of the alleged strategic partnership, although only Chinese observers were invited to the

³⁷ Ibid., 57.

³⁸ Ibid., 58.

³⁹ Akdağ, “Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Gelişimi,” 51.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 54.

“Efes 2018” exercises that year in İzmir.⁴¹ Even so, Turkey would not give up easily on China, although China seems to be rather reluctant when it comes to technology transfer. In 2021, news was published according to which Ankara plans to cooperate more closely with Pakistan in the field of arms procurement and production. Allegedly, Turkey wants this cooperation for its own *Siper* missile system and the TF-X fighter jet and hopes to convince China via Pakistan to share its technology.⁴² This is a far cry from Ankara’s hopes of space cooperation with China. Even worse, cooperating with China came with a high price at times: This was the case when China bought the dilapidated Ukrainian aircraft carrier “Varyag”. Bilateral diplomatic negotiations on the ship’s right to passage the Turkish straits lasted three years, from 1998-2001. Finally, a modus vivendi was found according to which the Varyag passed without motors. In exchange, China made several legal, diplomatic, and economic promises including a fantastic number of 2 million Chinese tourists annually – who never showed up. But the “Varyag” would trouble diplomatic waters: Japan and the USA alerted Ankara about their fears that China would soon revamp the ship into a functioning aircraft carrier once it made landfall on its shores. – These predictions came true as the “Varyag” underwent extensive refit and became China’s first aircraft carrier, the “Liaoning”. Even worse, the passing of the “Varyag” – with or without motors – weakened Turkey’s position regarding the Montreux convention, which regulates the passage of third nations’ (i.e. non-littoral) military vessels to the Black Sea and gave a precedent for future third nations’ demands and therefore runs the risk of questioning Turkey’s longstanding position on the Montreux treaty.⁴³ This episode is as exemplary as the common Turkish-Chinese military exercises for the nature of their bilateral military relations: they did not yield the hoped-for results in technology transfer, political or military clout for Turkey.

⁴¹ Pekcan, “Xi Jinping Dönemi Çin Dış Politikası ve Türkiye ile İlişkileri,” 62.

⁴² Selcan Hacıoğlu, “Turkey wants to tie up with Pakistan to make fighter jets, missiles and access to Chinese arms,” *The Print*, March 2, 2021, <https://theprint.in/world/turkey-wants-to-tie-up-with-pakistan-to-make-fighter-jets-missiles-access-chinese-tech/614564>

⁴³ Çolakoğlu, “Türkiye-Çin İlişkileri,” 57, 58; on the Montreux Treaty and its importance for Turkey see Kudret Özersay, “Montreux Boğazlar Sözleşmesi,” in: Baskın Oran, *Türk Dış Politikası, Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne: Olgular, Belgeler Yorumlar*, (vol. I 1919-1980), 370-84.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that Turkey-China relations are important from a European and transatlantic perspective, given the fact that they bring China closer to Europe. However, irritations with Ankara, notwithstanding there is no serious indication that Turkey would move strategically away from Europe or NATO, but as a sovereign country and aspiring power it shapes its relationship with the People's Republic of China on its own, according to its needs. This being said, there is of course a correlation between frustration with the West in general and the Europeans in particular, pushing Ankara closer to China. Yet, we do not think the push factor (frustration) is more important than the Chinese pull factor, namely the country's strong economy and huge market. After all, the Europeans too ushered to China after the 2008 financial crisis. In fact, economic relations between Ankara and Beijing are clearly the bedrock of a relationship dubbed "strategic" and they are not to Turkey's advantage – which does not mean that Turkey wouldn't need them! But regarding Turkey's many strategic challenges from the Middle East, the Kurdish issues or Libya do not help much, and cooperation is to be expected from the Chinese. Regarding the refugee crisis, it is the EU Ankara negotiates with, to quote but one important example. Even in Central Asia Turkey is somehow kept at bay and, worse, has to grudgingly accept widespread mistreatment of the Turkic Uygur people in China. Given the strength and the omnipresence of the Pan-Turanist narrative in Turkish society and academia, this is hard to stomach, even if the political elites shrug it off for realpolitik reasons. Finally, one observes a deepening and widening of bilateral relations but apparently without a clear strategic focus. This is even true for military relations, where Turkey wants to obtain Chinese hardware but snubbed Beijing already in 2015 when Ankara quit a signed missile deal. Maybe the issue is less strategic in nature: both countries have a long history as great empires humiliated by (Western) Europe and thus understand each other on a meta-level. Defying the West was in principle at the core of the Kemalist ideology as it was at Sun Yat-Sen's (and Mao's). Hence, both sides are very much at ease in recognizing each other's ambitions. However, as the circling of Turkey's warming up and cooling down towards China shows, there is not much of a strategic direction both sides found to go together, other than intensifying economic relations.